

Christchurch livestream service 06 June 2021 at 10.45

Worship Leader: Jennifer Rogers

Reader: Pauline Davis

Musicians: Tom Nichol, Sue Covington, James Bainbridge

Technician: John Hamblin

Call to worship:

Come to worship the living God who calls us to a new way of belonging.

Come to follow Jesus, whose love is stronger than evil.

Come in the power of the Spirit, who challenges our fears and renews our purpose.

Come to join God's family.

Hymn StF 363: My Jesus, my Saviour

My Jesus, my Saviour,

Lord there is none like you.

All of my days I want to praise

The wonders of your mighty love.

My comfort, my shelter,

Tower of refuge and strength,

Let every breath, all that I am,

Never cease to worship you.

Shout to the Lord all the earth, let us sing,

Power and majesty, praise to the King.

Mountains bow down

And the seas will roar

At the sound of your name.

I sing for joy at the work of your hands,

Forever I'll love you, forever I'll stand.

Nothing compares to the

Promise I have in you.

Prayers of Praise & Thanksgiving:

God of all life, we praise you

for you live and breathe in creation,

for making all things and for giving us a place in your world

We thank you for your goodness.

We praise you, for in Jesus you shared in our human story,
challenging us to see life differently.

And choosing us to be part of your family.

We thank you for your love.

We praise you,

for you empower us with the vitality of your Spirit,
renewing us day by day.

We thank you for your living presence.

God, Creator, Redeemer and Spirit,

We praise you for the signs of your glory,

and for promising to be with us always

Thanks be to you

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,
Hallowed be your Name, Your kingdom come,
Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
Now and forever. Amen.

Hymn StF 161: Speak, O Lord, as we come to you

Speak, O Lord, as we come to You
To receive the food of Your Holy Word
Take Your truth, plant it deep in us
Shape and fashion us in Your likeness
That the light of Christ might be seen today
In our acts of love and our deeds of faith
Speak, O Lord, and fulfill in us
All Your purposes for Your glory

Teach us Lord, full obedience
Holy reverence, true humility
Test our thoughts and our attitudes
In the radiance of Your purity
Cause our faith to rise, cause our eyes to see
Your majestic love and authority
Words of pow'r that can never fail
Let their truth prevail over unbelief

Speak, O Lord, and renew our minds
Help us grasp the heights of Your plans for us
Truths unchanged from the dawn of time
That will echo down through eternity
And by grace we'll stand on Your promises
And by faith we'll walk as You walk with us
Speak, O Lord, till Your church is built
And the earth is filled with Your glory.

Introduction:

Mark begins his Gospel with the words 'The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God'. Even so, throughout the first half of the Gospel there are numerous encounters with Jesus which raise the question of who Jesus is. The stories and descriptions written by Mark are aimed at the reader drawing the conclusion that he is indeed the Son of God.

The passage we are looking at today comes in the second half of chapter 3. In the first part of the chapter, we are told that Jesus healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, much to the displeasure of the Pharisees, and healed many others including those possessed by evil spirits. Crowds followed Jesus as they heard all about what he was doing. He appoints the twelve disciples and also gives them authority to drive out demons.

We then come to the passage we are about to hear, where we see that not only the Jewish scribes, but also his family grappling with questions as to who Jesus is and the source of his power and authority. This is a subtle change as up until this point Jesus has only been questioned about his religious practice.

We hear from Mark chapter 3 beginning at verse 20.

Bible reading: Mark 3: 20-35 (NIVUK)

²⁰ Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. ²¹ When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind.'

²² And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons.'

²³ So Jesus called them over to him and began to speak to them in parables: 'How can Satan drive out Satan? ²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. ²⁶ And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. ²⁷ In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house without first tying him up. Then he can plunder the strong man's house. ²⁸ Truly I tell you, people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter, ²⁹ but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin.'

³⁰ He said this because they were saying, 'He has an impure spirit.'

³¹ Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. ³² A crowd was sitting round him, and they told him, 'Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.'

³³ 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' he asked.

³⁴ Then he looked at those seated in a circle round him and said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵ Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother?'

Reflection:

I wonder what your initial thoughts are after hearing our Bible passage.

As in several places in Mark's Gospel, the way the author records the events in this passage seems quite haphazard, moving from one scene to another and then returning to an earlier one rather like an episode in a TV soap. It's also full of confusing details and Jesus generates a lot of worry in this passage in the pronouncements people express concerning him and in the declarations he makes himself. In short, I think it is one of those passages in the Bible that as a member of the congregation I will always want to hear more about but as a preacher I would rather not preach!

Let's look a bit more closely at the text and see if we can enter the story with our imaginations and maybe decide who we are in this episode.

Immediately before our passage we are told Jesus was on a mountainside but now the setting changes from the open countryside to an episode inside a house. However, what hasn't changed is that crowds are still swarming Jesus as they have at every turn almost since the beginning of his ministry. So much so that Jesus and his disciples are neither given the time nor the opportunity to eat. Perhaps they'd thought that by going into a house they'd be able to find a bit of peace and quiet, with time to rest for a while. But Jesus' popularity meant that there were no places to get away from the incessant demands of the large number of people who had flocked to the area to see, hear and even touch him.

In this scene, the crowd does not speak; they express no worries, but just want more of Jesus.

Then Jesus' family turn up and the worrying begins. People are talking. Some people think he has 'gone out of his mind'. There was obviously a wider concern about Mary's eldest son. Maybe they thought he'd been carried along too far on this wave of popularity that seemed to be sweeping the area; perhaps they held the same traditional views of the religious teachers and authorities and were surprised, embarrassed or just plain worried of what might become of him. So, Jesus' family try to take action to restrain him, stop him and protect him from himself.

Then the scribes, the teachers of the law, are brought into the story, almost as a flashback within the scene about Jesus and his family. In this way the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities, which we can read about at the beginning of chapter 3, begins again. The fact that they had 'come down from

Jerusalem' suggests that Jesus' notoriety had spread to the capital and that the national religious leaders were worried enough to travel north and deal with this provincial preacher who was causing so much trouble.

The scribes shared the view of those who had been raising concerns with Jesus' family that his behaviour must mean that he is demon possessed, and not just with any demon, but the prince of demons, Beelzebub or Satan. In their opinion, this was the only explanation for what was happening. So, they offer the most damning assessment they can.

Once the three groups – the crowd, the family and the scribes – have found themselves brought together in the same episode in these interwoven scenes, Jesus speaks.

He uses the scribes' logic to make his own case and to argue against them. He agrees with them that it would take a higher power to do what he is doing, for it is through the Holy Spirit that he does what he does. Jesus clearly implies that it is through this power that he is able to tie up the 'strong' man' that they know as Satan. It is through the Holy Spirit that he is able to defeat the power of evil.

With a degree of authority, Jesus concludes his debate with the scribes. He turns the tables on them, making it clear that failure to recognise the Holy Spirit working through him and being set on calling the Spirit's work the activity of Satan, is unforgivable.

The scribes were regarded as the religious experts, the people who supposedly had the closest relationship with God as a result of their understanding of his law. But when they found God at work, instead of the wrongdoing they had come seeking, they had failed to see the good in front of their eyes. To Jesus this was unacceptable and he made his views clear.

Then we come to the final dramatic scene as it returns to Jesus' family. His Mother and brothers can't even get into the house easily as there are so many people there. Instead they send word to Jesus through the crowd that they have arrived. Jesus responds by asking the question: 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' We may find this surprising or even mildly shocking, but in Jesus' world it was scandalous – I can almost hear the gasps as he says it. The family bond in those times was tight and long lasting. It was part of the God-given fabric of thinking and living. It was part of the out working of loyalty to Israel as the people of God.

Finally, Jesus answers his own question by saying his family is anyone who does the will of God – not his biological Mother and brothers. With those words, Jesus cuts through the whole traditional structure. He has a different vocation, a different mission and it involves radically redefining family. He is starting a new family, a new holy people, and is doing so without regard for ordinary family bonds.

So, by interweaving the various scenes in this passage, Mark's Gospel appears to be comparing the similarities of the scribes and Jesus' family and demonstrating that in both cases they misunderstand who Jesus is and fail to recognise that his work is of God.

Therefore by the end of this story, the reader is brought to the point where Jesus is opposed by both these groups of people. It was not those who were related to him, or the highly educated, as the scribes were, who acknowledged Jesus, but the ordinary people. It is those who do the will of God who are recognised by Jesus as his family.

Only three chapters into the gospel narrative and a lot of people are worried and cannot figure out who Jesus is and whether he is a leader worth following. There were many people in Israel who were looking for a new leader, a Messiah who would overturn the ruling order and restore them as God's people. Jesus has certainly promised good news, but he keeps insisting that we must not mistake that for comfortable news. What's certain here is this: the kingdom of God Jesus keeps talking about is not going to be about maintaining business as usual.

We too have to decide who is this man? And do we really want to be part of his family, follow him and play an active part in bringing in the kingdom of God in this place? He calls us all to listen to him and stay loyal to him; even if those 'outside' think we are crazy. The gospel and allegiance to Jesus can produce unexpected and unwelcome division and none of us, if we are honest with ourselves, like being disturbed or having to change established views or ways. But now more than ever as restrictions are lifted we need to prayerfully seek new ways, grasp a new vision and be brave enough to move forward in love, led by the Holy Spirit.

Recognising the Spirit's work and doing the will of God, centred on Jesus are not easy but Mark's call to his readers then and now is to follow Jesus wherever he may lead us and whatever the cost.

Prayer of Confession:

Lord, when we don't listen to what you are telling us and fail to follow you; forgive us and help us to recognise the Spirit's work and do your will.

When we are set in our ways and not open to change; forgive us and help us to follow you along new paths.

When we see evil and fail to confront it; forgive us and help us to be bold and to speak out for you.

When we label and reject others because they are different; forgive us and help us to love one another for our differences.

When we are divided by our own prejudice or compromise; forgive us and help us to seek your will.

Renew us and give us the strength to overcome our fears and to work as one for your kingdom of love. Amen.

Hymn StF 673: Will you come and follow me?

Will you come and follow me

if I but call your name?

Will you go where you don't know

and never be the same?

Will you let my love be shown,

will you let my name be known,

will you let my life be grown

in you and you in me?

Will you leave yourself behind

if I but call your name?

Will you care for cruel and kind

and never be the same?

Will you risk the hostile stare

should your life attract or scare,

will you let me answer prayer

in you and you in me?

Will you let the blinded see

if I but call your name?

Will you set the prisoners free

and never be the same?

Will you kiss the leper clean

and do such as this unseen,

and admit to what I mean

in you and you in me?

Will you love the 'you' you hide

if I but call your name?

Will you quell the fear inside

and never be the same?

Will you use the faith you've found

to reshape the world around

through my sight and touch and sound
in you and you in me?

Lord, your summons echoes true
when you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you
and never be the same.
In your company I'll go
where your love and footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow
in you and you in me.

Prayers of Intercession:

Gracious and loving God,
As members of your family, we pray for all who are suffering in any way at the moment.
We name before you those we know who are on our hearts today.

(Silence)

We pray for our church and our circuit. Holy Spirit of God, come within your Church; stir your Church. May we be fit for purpose for the next part of our journey? Lord God, as your church we offer ourselves to you. Help us to be faithful to our calling.

We thank you for our town and we pray for our neighbours, our friends and our families. We pray that you will enable us to go to those people with the good news of your Gospel. We pray that Hitchin will become a beacon of hope, that you will breathe new life into our streets and that people will be awakened to the new life you offer to all.

We bring before you our nation. We pray for the leaders of our nation that you will give them wisdom to lead well. Guide them in your ways. We pray that people will turn to you and recognise your grace and your mercy, and the hope that is found in you.

We pray for our world. We think of places:

Where there is war,

Where there is hunger,

Where there is persecution

And where there are soaring numbers of infections and deaths through Covid-19.

We ask for your hand to be upon those people who are faithfully following you all over the world in difficult circumstances.

Lord, pour out your Spirit upon this world so everyone will know of your amazing love.

In your holy name we pray. Amen.

Hymn StF 407: Hear the Call of the Kingdom

Hear the call of the Kingdom

Lift your eyes to the King

Let His song rise within you

As a fragrant offering

Of how God rich in mercy

Came in Christ to redeem

All who trust in His unfailing grace

Hear the call of the Kingdom

To be children of light

With the mercy of heaven

The humility of Christ

Walking justly before Him

Loving all that is right

That the life of Christ may shine through us

*King of Heaven we will answer the call
We will follow bringing hope to the world
Filled with passion filled with power to proclaim...
Salvation in Jesus' name*

Hear the call of the Kingdom
To reach out to the lost
With the Father's compassion
In the wonder of the cross
Bringing peace and forgiveness
And a hope yet to come
Let the nations put their trust in Him

Closing Prayer & Blessing:

Go with the expectation that the Lord our God goes with us.

Go to do God's will and not ours.

Go and proclaim who Jesus is and the hope we have in him.

And may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be upon us and remain with us always. Amen.